

**Comments on ‘A Marxist Critique of the Individual, Rational, Self-Interested,  
Wealth Maximizer’**

This paper brings to light many pertinent observations and claims about the nature of individuals, our relationships to one another, and society as a whole. This paper appears to be deeply concerned with human psychology and the philosophical conditions that characterize it. I plan to focus my comments on both the psychological and normative aspects of the paper: specifically, concerns about the author’s<sup>1</sup> examination of the processes that shape our minds and the prevailing questions that almost certainly follow if these claims are true. In short, I would like to explore further the author’s examination of the human mind and our connections to each other.

The object of the author’s critique (that is, the concept of the individual, rational, self-interested, wealth maximizer [IRSW]) is principally concerned with psychology. On page 3, the author notes:

Smith’s notion of capitalism relies on two assumptions: (1) that humans are essentially self-interested and (2) that humans, being utility-minded, will naturally act in the interests of others in order to preserve their own self-interest. (Page 3)

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<sup>1</sup> ‘The author’ always refers to the author of ‘The Marxist Critique’

In other words, Smith argues that 1) the human mind *necessarily* functions in such a way such so that it leads to the IRSW and that 2) understanding this helps us predict human behavior. The author then goes on to trace the discursive processes through which Smith's influence has led to the subsumption of the modern mind under the conditions of Capitalism. To do this, the author uses examples like Milton Friedman's Chicago School Capitalist campaign (page 5) and the recent 'law and economics movement' (page 6). The author then draws upon Adorno and Horkheimer in order to explain how both the modern day culture and advertising industries create and instill this ideology. They do so, the author argues, through a recursive and compounding process of defining and homogenizing societal ideals, such as success, satisfaction, and personal identity (pages 6-7). These industries then promote the means through which to attain these ideals: voracious consumerism and hard work (page 9). And they instill these ideals through psychological manipulation, what Adorno and Horkheimer call, 'psychotechnique' (page 7 and 9). "It is at [this] point", the author argues, "that individual actions, which are continuations of the production process, are 'thoroughly imbued with the nature and requirements of capital'" (page 10).

Smith's influence has perpetuated a false sense of the way our minds *must* work. The author both explains why the IRSW is not a necessary condition of our minds and beautifully traces the potentially problematic impact of Smith's view. If the author is right, the modern mind has fallen into a pit of subjugation and objectification.

It is at this point that I wish to ask a very important question: to what degree have we truly actualized the concerns set forth in paper? How deeply, if at all, do we conform to this model of laborer and consumer? How much of our critical freedom have we lost? And who is the 'we' that this paper refers to? Is this 'we' limited to specific job-holders, property owners, gender-types, or racial identities? Who is left out, or rather, does anyone escape this category?

Furthermore, this paper critiques an essentialist account of human psychology and seems to be alluding to a more malleable view of the human mind. To what degree can our thoughts – can the structures of our minds – truly be coerced? How truly malleable is the human mind? Or are there beliefs, desires we necessarily hold?

Lastly, if the author is right about the degree to which we've been subsumed under this capitalist ideology, then what have we lost? And what is practically possible to re-attain? Conversely, what have we gained (quality of life, technological advance, scientific understanding)? And, most importantly, how ought we move forward? Is knowing about our shortcomings enough to liberate us from this situation? If not, what sort of action ought we take? And to what end – or for what type of future – should we seek?

I have intentionally left these questions open-ended, so as to promote a fuller discussion of the implications of this paper. I hope that drawing out the psychological aspects of this paper has provided a somewhat unique lens to approaching this issue. I would like to thank everyone for being here today and, especially, the author for sharing such a well-constructed and interesting paper.